BLOOMSBURG UNIVERSITY

Being Deaf in the Community

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Question

“Blindness separates us from things but deafness separates us from people”-Helen Keller. Helen Keller, who experienced blindness and deafness, suggests that deafness is the harder obstacle to overcome in a community. I will address how people who are deaf in the community feel isolated, how they feel in school and how they feel in either a hearing or Deaf community. I will be drawing on previous research to show how it feels to be a deaf or hard of hearing person in the community. Also, I will be using interviews I’ve conducted with college students who are deaf with cochlear implants that explain how they feel in the community. Finally answering the question, “How does it feel to be a person who is deaf at Bloomsburg University?”

**Background**

Ford & Kent (2013), Skelton & Valentine (2003), and Miller (2010) all did studies on how people who are deaf feel in the hearing and Deaf world and how these people identify themselves.

All of the researchers mentioned somewhere in their research, something about the person who is deaf feeling either isolated or alienated.1 All three research journals show that in some way they feel left out. Miller found that: “…common experiences are often based on the negative experiences of linguistic/ communicative exclusion from family discussions, mealtimes, holiday gatherings, and other events. Such common experiences often bring with them feelings of inferiority…” (Miller, 2010, p.483). 2 Deaf people feel that because they cannot speak as well, they are inferior, which leads to isolation. They also feel this way because the medical view on deafness is pessimistic. This is because “The ‘medical model’ of deafness defines being able to hear by compared deaf people’s hearing to their hearing, ‘normal’ peers. The deaf person [d]eafness is tested and measured against ‘normal’ hearing levels’” (Skelton & Valentine, 2003, p.454-455)2. The deaf people are being isolated everywhere even though “D/deaf people themselves do not all see [deafness] in the same way” (Skelton & Valentine, 2003, p. 464). Ford and Kent talk about someone who is deaf telling people that they are deaf. One of their interviewees said that when people find out that they are deaf, they start talking to them differently even though they were just talking to them normally before (Ford & Kent, 2013, p.43). They feel like ‘normal’ people and do not want to be treated differently.3

School is another place where deaf children feel different than hearing children. In schools, sometimes the children are not allowed to use sign language. Only oral conversation is used as a “system of partial integration into mainstream education” (Skelton & Valentine, 2003, p. 456). This is hard for the students because sign language might be the only way that they know how to communicate. Because talking is such a big part of school, the children might feel left out. Ford & Kent saw “…that being the only Deaf in the class was a daunting experience” (Ford & Kent, 2013, p.42). Because a deaf person is different from the norm of the group they are normally left out. This makes creating friendships harder for a deaf student in a mainstream school to make friends because they are different from their peers.

In the Deaf world there are two communities; one is the Deaf community and one is the Hearing community. When deaf people feel stuck in the middle. Some of the reason for this may be caused by getting cochlear implants to help them hear better. It was found that, “…being Deaf is part of a linguistic minority” (Skelton & Valentine, 2003, p. 456). This means that deaf people are considered a minority in the hearing world. When they are in the Hearing community, they might feel taken advantage of because they are the only deaf person in the discussion. However, when they are part of the Deaf community, they isolate themselves from the Hearing community (Ford and Kent, 2013, p.42). It is especially hard if the deaf person has cochlear implants. This is because they are judged by both communities. It is very tough to be a deaf person in the community because they don’t fit into either the Deaf or Hearing community because if they chooses one, they are missing out what the other one offers.

**Methods**

To show how it feels to be deaf in the community, I talked to two people at Bloomsburg University. They are both deaf and have cochlear implants. This means that they can hear slightly, because they have a device that is surgically implanted into their heads. The device is placed right behind their ear and it is used to improve hearing. I asked the girls questions about being deaf in the community and how they feel about it. The girls’ answers they coincided with the researchers.

**Findings**

To gather my findings, I conducted interviews. I interviewed a girl named Heidi and another named Claudia. Both were asked the same questions on the different feelings they have as a deaf person at Bloomsburg University. 1

I found, from talking to Heidi, how people react to finding out she is deaf. Heidi said that she has trouble in crowds because it is hard for her to hear people when it is really loud. Since, she has cochlear implants and functions like a hearing person, they do not always believe that she is deaf. Most of the time after they realize that she is truly deaf, they think it’s cool. Heidi said to me that when she asks people to repeat themselves, because they are mumbling or not talking clearly, “they basically scream at me” (Interview, 2013) because they think if they scream she’ll hear them better. However, she told me that all she needs them to do is speak a little louder and clearly2. This misunderstanding leads to the feeling of alienation. She said that she sometimes worries about making friends because she is afraid that they might treat her differently. So she waits on telling people that she is deaf because she doesn’t want to be treated differently.

Claudia told me that a lot of people do not think that she is deaf because the way she speaks. She has cochlear implants and devices that help her hear. Without them she is completely deaf. So she always remind them that she is deaf, but if someone speaks clearly she can understand them. Sometimes, when a person has cochlear implants the Deaf community doesn’t accept them because they feel that cochlear implants take away the identity of being deaf. She said that she relates better to the hearing community because she’s had bad experiences where most deaf people didn't accept her for who she was and didn't consider her deaf because she could speak. However, the hearing community was a lot more acceptable and interested and friendly towards her cochlear implants. Since, she grew up with people judging her, she is afraid of people treating her differently because she is deaf. Now she always want to make a good impression.

Heidi and Claudia do not want to be treated like the outcast in the group. They just want to be treated like anyone else would be. The only difference for Heidi and Claudia is that they need people to speak clearly and not mumble. Other than that they are like anyone else.3

**Conclusion**

Based on the information that I found someone who is deaf feels isolated or alienated. Heidi and Claudia both said that they felt like they were being judged or treated differently because of their deafness. This goes along what Kent and Ford, Skelton and Valentine, and Miller said about being treated differently. When deaf people have cochlear implants they are treated differently because it seems that they can hear but in actuality they are still deaf. Also it shows that you should never judge a person because of their ability to hear.

References

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